

27 October 2000

The Committee Secretary
House Communications Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Rural and Regional Radio Inquiry

Secretary:

RECEIVED

30 OCT 2000

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND
THE ARTS

House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Communications,
Transport and the Arts

Submission No: 225

Date Received: 30/10/00

Secretary: Janet Holmes

The NSW Farmers' Association welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to House Communications Committee in its inquiry into the adequacy of commercial, community and public radio services in regional and rural Australia. Radio services are an integral part of communication in rural areas providing news, market and weather information, current affairs, local information and entertainment.

Commercial radio has traditionally delivered very focussed community benefits. Whereas the ABC is regionally based, commercial radio usually centred on individual towns. Traditionally, the programming has been focussed on those communities, giving a sense of community. Given the distance and isolation often faced by rural people it is a vital means of communication at a local as well as State and National level.

Future Trends

The Association is concerned that the move to centralise ownership of radio stations into just a few hands has already affected the local community identification. Already a lot of the programming is networked from a feed station in either Sydney or a major regional centre, sometimes not even in the same state. As digital technology is upgraded, networking will become more prevalent as it is cheaper than maintaining staff at the local level.

This will have implications for the relationship between the local commercial radio station and its listeners. For instance services such as community service announcements, lost and found announcements, funeral notices, locally based sports shows that go to make up the identity of a local commercial radio station could be lost if programming is predominantly networked from a central feeder station.

Most importantly, local news coverage could suffer from networking. Already a network of radio stations in northern NSW that used to provide their own local news services for their own communities now take a regional news service. So there is also the issue of networking within networks.

This will obviously have an affect on career opportunities in local communities. Radio announcers often come from the local community as do radio journalists starting out. Local commercial radio has traditionally been a fine training ground for journalists and announcers

and most of the current big names in radio in metropolitan news and programs served their apprenticeships in country radio. If country radio programming is centralised to a few networks, the long term standard of announcers in major cities will suffer from the lack of competitive challenge. Likewise, fewer jobs at country radio stations for young journalists will also affect the quality of radio journalism overall.

New Technologies

We are concerned that using digital technology already available, a radio station in Sydney could provide the same programming to every radio transmitter in Australia, localising the program by computer in commercial and weather breaks. There would no longer be the need for a radio station to have a physical presence in any country town.

This style of modern radio may be very popular with a young, affluent audience but will be of little relevance to the older demographics.

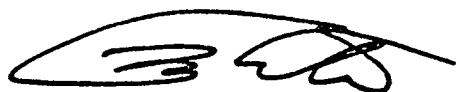
Community radio stations will increasingly offer alternatives to commercial radio by replacing the local content traditionally provided by commercial radio. However, because networked radio will become increasingly viable, it's likely that community radio will remain the poor second cousin surviving on volunteerism and poorly funded.

Internet radio will increasingly be able to provide targeted information to groups of individuals with similar information requirements, however, this will depend on line speed.

Recommendations:

1. Retain the requirement for local radio to provide a local news service by journalists (not just a summary of the local newspaper by the morning announcer).
2. Ensure obligation to continue AM station licences indefinitely to provide alternative broadcasting for different demographics in the community.
3. Increase funding to community stations or further loosen commercial restrictions.
4. Provide adequate line speed to rural communities for internet radio.

Yours sincerely,



Mal Peters
Chairman - Rural Affairs